

Advantages and
disadvantages of
having smoke free
workplaces
economics essay



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Through the years, awareness against smoking has grown indefinitely and nowadays it is a known fact that smoking, as well as passive smoking is harmful to people's health. This leads us to the danger of these effects in workplaces, which is becoming a serious issue for many people and demand a healthy working environment by insisting to create a legislation about the employer's and employee's rights and obligations. Nowadays some form of legislation is already in place and is observed in most workplaces; however it still must be enforced even further for the sake of people's welfare. Although having a smoke free workplace is generally the ideal, this also has a series of disadvantages which influences us on an economic and social level.

Advantages of Smoke Free Workplaces

There are six main reasons for employers to support smoke free workplaces:

employee welfare;

level of productivity;

reduction of costs;

greater job satisfaction;

helpful surroundings;

Positive corporate image.

Employee Welfare

The most valuable investment that an employer can make is an investment in employee welfare because the employees drive the company to success or failure. Statistics show that employees who do not smoke or are not
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exposed to constant passive smoking take fewer sick days and in the long run are more effective. Employees who smoke or are subject to intense passive smoking are more likely to retire early or go on disability. It is a known fact that most people want to quit smoking and therefore a healthier environment at work may encourage them to quit. In some cases, it may be possible to get lower health, life, and disability insurance coverage as fewer employees smoke.

Level of productivity

Nowadays smoke free workplaces are encouraged to be implemented by the employers not solely because of health reasons but also because “ the main reason for productivity losing due to the smoking in the workplace is the absenteeism”, as the “ Action on Smoking and Health” (ASH) suggests (www.ash.org.uk). This loss of productivity is contributed by employees having too many smoke breaks which cause numerous interruptions to the job at hand and therefore becoming inefficient. In addition the smoke breaks are not regulated with a specific time or frequency. Due to this inefficiency, non smokers have to work harder to compensate for the work load of the smokers when they are on smoke breaks. This may also create squabbles between employees due to the unbalanced workload of smokers versus non smokers and non smokers may argue about the detriment of passive smoking, which they might feel is against their fundamental rights. This kind of friction may influence the levels of productivity and harmony of a work place. Hereunder is an excerpt about the difference a smoker could make to a business.

“ It costs the average business £2000-£3000 more to employ a smoker than a non smoker. In the South East alone, an estimated £370 million is lost to businesses due to sick days taken by smokers. A staggering £1. 2 billion is lost from employees taking smoking breaks throughout the day. Research has also shown that 70% of smokers want to quit – becoming smoke free could help them do so.” (Government Office South East, 2005)

Reduction of costs

Companies invest a lot of money into hiring and training their employees and therefore it is important for them to be healthy. If employees are encouraged to quit smoking, employers will see less loss of skills and knowledge, and therefore will reduce the cost of training employees in the long run. Statistics show that many companies which offered smoke free workplaces to their employees all ended up having positive results. The Canadian Lung Association reported that the economic benefits of smoke free workplaces are noticeable over the long term such as five years or more.

Greater job satisfaction

Several studies show that the vast majority of both smokers and non smokers prefer to work in a smoke free environment. When employees are healthy and have a strong sense of personal welfare, there is an improvement in their morale and the overall quality of the work environment. In this environment, employees are more productive and feel a greater sense of loyalty. Statistics show that the majority of people who smoke want to quit and several national surveys that took place in Canada showed that fewer people are smoking and those who smoke are smoking less.

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Helpful surroundings

In our everyday life we experience two environments which have a great influence on people's health, which are homes and workplaces. Therefore the workplace is a very important surrounding where one can help people to quit smoking for many reasons:

A substantial amount of time is spent at the workplace

Due to the large number of employees that workplaces contain, this environment is able to reach out to many people and therefore have the chance to influence an effective amount of smokers constantly.

Workplaces give the opportunity to meet with people from all walks of life and consequently the workplace might be a suitable place for smokers to get the necessary information and support from other employees, and from others who promote health in the workplace.

Enforcing a smoking ban in workplaces encourages smokers to cut down or quit and the non smokers to stay away from smoking.

The employer's role is very important in this process because they can present employees opportunities and choices which will help them succeed in quitting smoking. By providing smoke free workplaces, employers and health promoters in workplaces can give the necessary support for those trying to quit.

Positive corporate image

In the business world, the corporate image means a lot because what a company represents influences the opinion of people interested in the company. A positive image helps attract potential investors and valuable employees. This kind of image is up kept by complying with the non smoking legislation and offering of services and support to the company's employees. The greater the commitment of the company in its employee's welfare, the more respected the company becomes. The companies which offer such smoke free workplaces and employee support become workplaces of choice.

Employers and employees – rights and obligations

These above mentioned factors have led to the creation of policies which observe the rights and obligations of the employers and employees. Such policies include

Operating guidelines of a smoke free workplace such as the rights of non smokers and the conformity with the legislation of the specific country which relates to smoking in work places.

The legislation nowadays covers all workplaces and certain countries do not make provision for smoking in restrooms, canteens, corridors, personal offices or meeting lounges. Specific places and times must be set from the company if it allows smoking areas.

Such provisions as mentioned above are available at the employer's discretion, including policies regarding smoking outdoors or providing the necessary litter bins where the cigarette butts can be thrown away.

Employers have the right to write down time allowed for smoking periods and the addition of working time for the non smokers as contractual obligations and conditions.

Employees have the right to complain about conditions with reference to having a smoke free workplace.

Employees have the obligation to comply with policies written down in a contractual agreement and if they fail to comply, they must face consequences.

Employers can offer support services and counseling for those willing to quit smoking.

Employees with a higher health risk such as people with asthma and pregnant women must be given special attention in order to keep potential risks at bay.

The entire smoking policies must be reviewed regularly so that if any changes are necessary due to new legislation or an initial adjustment or stricter policies, these can be provided for.

These policies may range from minor restrictions to complete ban of smoking.

At first companies opted for segregated areas in a work place by separating the smokers from the non smokers. Therefore this required that the groups have their separate workstations, office space, lunch area etc... Although initially this seemed ideal, it is not that effective since the tobacco smoke is

still not entirely eliminated through ventilation systems or electrostatic filters. Therefore the end result will end up being similar to a workplace without segregation, although with the effects considerably reduced. In the end smokers did not like being separated from their friends and colleagues, and non smokers still reported that they could inhale the tobacco smoke in their segregated area. Generally there are mainly 2 effective policies which are implemented:

In order to be a smoke free workplace, no smoking should be allowed in company premises and vehicles. Although it may allow designated outdoor areas where one is free to smoke.

An alternative policy to the designated area might be an area which is well ventilated.

In various aspects, tobacco smoke can be compared to any other air contaminant, which in order for it to be reduced or completely eliminated, a controlling method has to be created at the source. This is where the importance of policies comes into play. By implementing policies and enforcing measures we are ensuring that we safe guard the welfare of the employees. However it is useless to implement a smoke free workplace unless you have the support of your employees. Therefore it is imperative that such a transition be put into practice as smoothly as possible through discussion from beforehand. In order to do such a transition specific steps can be taken, such as organising open discussions to all employees of every group. When such discussion has taken place, then a company with the backup of its employees can start the transition whilst keeping the

employees informed at every stage. In the long run when a company has completed such a transition, it must put its foot down and be prepared to enforce a smoking ban. It is important that after such a ban, no one is granted special privileges among smokers or else resentment amongst them will start to arise.

Disadvantages of Smoke Free Workplaces

Although many would agree that there are many advantages to smoke free workplaces, banning smoking in workplaces also has its disadvantages on a national aspect. An immediate disadvantage which will take place after a complete ban is the fall in the sale of cigarettes and revenue of the tobacco industry. At first this might seem not a bad idea, however the fallout effects of such a sharp drop in the economy will have an effect on the national monetary value. The British tobacco industry stated that if the tobacco legislation was launched, 1.6 billion pounds would be lost every year. Due to the sudden reduction of cigarette consumption, this huge deficit would be devastating to the tobacco industry. In addition a huge national loss is made from tobacco taxation.

“ Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) indicated that the UK has the highest tobacco taxes in the European Union (www.ash.org.uk/taxation.htm). For example, the price of a pack of 20 premium brand cigarettes currently costs 4.65 pounds, which is almost 80% of the price of a packet of cigarettes consists of taxation (www.ash.org.uk). The Government earned 9,616 million pounds in revenue from tobacco in 2001, and earned 8,055 million pounds in revenue from tobacco duties for the financial year 2002-2003 (www.irs.gov).”

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These statistics show how much money is generated from cigarette taxation and could be why many governments still refuse to commit themselves to tobacco control legislation even though they are hazardous. Banning smoking in workplaces would reduce the amount of cigarettes bought and therefore less revenue from tobacco taxation for the government.

Another disadvantage of banning smoking in workplaces, is the level of unemployment due to a reduction in consumption of cigarettes, less employees will be needed to manufacture and distribute cigarettes.

“ According to the official estimates, in 2002, 3, 362 people were employed in the tobacco industry, with a further 3, 653 employed in the wholesale trade of tobacco products ([www. dudley. gov. uk](http://www.dudley.gov.uk)). Compared with the data in 1996, 6, 000 people were employed in the manufacturing of tobacco, with a further 7, 100 employed in the wholesale and retail sale of tobacco products ([www. surneyllp. org. uk](http://www.surneyllp.org.uk)).”

Approximately the tobacco industry let go twice the amount of employees in 2002 with respect to 1996. Due to the level of unemployment which would be caused if the legislation was implemented completely, may be another reason why governments are hesitant to such legislation.

The disadvantages so far were on a national level; however there are disadvantages which effect smokers on an individual level in their everyday social life. Not all smokers are able to cope with changes well and when one tries to modify such habits, some might find the transition much harder than they would have thought. There are moments when such smokers think it is impossible and suffer serious breakdowns or random moments of
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uncontrollable rage. When the tobacco legislation is implemented on a national scale unemployed smokers might find it harder to find a job which suits their circumstance.

The employers also have some disadvantages when committing themselves to smoke free workplaces, for example they have a smaller selection from which to choose employees if smokers will not be willing to conform to such environments. This might create a bigger problem if valuable people would not even apply for such a job because of these environment conditions. This could lead possible competitors who don't impose these conditions to employ such valuable people and therefore end up having an advantage in the market. If companies are willing to go through with a smoke free workplace, they should be prepared to incur some costs such as ventilation systems or separate areas for smokers.

By now it should be quite clear that although implementing a smoke free workplace has its pros and cons, one should always give more importance to people's health rather than the financial aspect of the situation. Although this might be easier said than done especially for those employers which are directly or indirectly dependent on the tobacco industry, we must keep into perspective that as humans we must respect one another above all.

Therefore it is the employer's moral duty to protect his employee's welfare above any financial gain one might achieve. This is also relevant for most governments which under oath swear to protect the rights of its people. We as a people must also do our part by respecting other people's rights and following the rules which in the end are for our own benefit. An example in

this matter is when a smoker refrains from smoking in a public place
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because he might be a source of passive smoking to other people, not because the law necessarily says so but due to respect for one another. Non smokers also have the moral obligation to respect other people's choice to smoke where it is legally allowed and in such a case the non smoker can avoid being around the smoker if he/she has a choice. Although in an ideal world cigarettes do not exist, we can only try and help smokers, but we ultimately cannot impose anything on them and therefore must respect their choice.